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ABSTRACT

This performance guide is designed for teachers to use with students before and after a performance of "Black Nativity," a play about the birth of Jesus, celebrated in the tradition of African-American culture and with gospel music at its heart. The guide, called a "Cuesheet," contains three sheets for use in class, addressing: (1) Celebrating the Holiday Season; (2) The Creation of "Black Nativity"; (3) What Gospel Music Is; (4) Elements To Listen for in Gospel Music; (5) The Gospel Tradition of Collaboration, with information about the playwright, the director, and the audience's role; and (6) Questions for Before and After the Performance. (SR)

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CUE SHEET
FOR STUDENTS

BLACK NATIVITY

december 12-31, 1995

CELEBRATING THE HOLIDAY SEASON

What holiday do you enjoy the most?

What do you do to celebrate?

What holiday ceremonies do people participate in every year?

Holidays are important times for people to come together to share what is new in their lives, and to celebrate old traditions. Families, nationalities, cultures, races, and religions have different holidays and different ways of celebrating.

Do you light a menorah?

Do you decorate a tree?

Do you light fireworks?

Do you eat special foods?

Do you wear special clothes?

Christmas is an important holiday for many people around the world. It is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.

What Christmas songs celebrate the birth of Jesus?

What holiday decorations or traditions represent the birth of Jesus?

Have you ever seen a lawn or sidewalk that has statues arranged to show a scene of the birth of Jesus?

The word "NATIVITY" means birth, especially the place, conditions, or circumstances of being born. When the word is capitalized—"Nativity"—it indicates the birth of Jesus or Christmas.

The play that you are going to see is ***Black Nativity***. What do you think that title might mean?

You probably guessed that this play is about the birth of Jesus, celebrated in the tradition of Black or African-American culture. The famous African-American poet, novelist, and playwright Langston Hughes wrote ***Black Nativity***.

Welcome to Cuesheet,

one of a series of performance guides published by the Education Department of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C.

This *Cuesheet* is designed to be used by teachers and students, before and after attending a performance of ***Black Nativity***.

✪

Students and teachers may read *Cuesheet* together.

✪

Small groups of students may use *Cuesheet* for collaborative activities, and share the results with the class.

✪

Individual students may use *Cuesheet* in school or at home with friends and family members.

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cover photo: Katherine Smith as Mary
photo by Carol Pratt

THE CREATION OF BLACK NATIVITY

Langston Hughes' 1958 novel *Tambourines to Glory* featured gospel music. Gospel music was popular at this time, and Hughes was inspired to incorporate more of the music into his dramatic writing. He was also aware of the popularity of Gian Carlo Menotti's Christmas television opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. Hughes decided that, rather than write a play featuring a few gospel songs, he would create a Nativity play with gospel music at its heart and soul. For inspiration, he took to the streets of New York, visiting storefront churches and temples and sitting in on religious services. The piece that was originally titled *Wasn't That a Mighty Day!* later became ***Black Nativity***.

Black Nativity had a successful opening on Broadway in 1961. The audience responded so enthusiastically that the cast sang for an additional half hour after the close of the show! Gian Carlo Menotti arranged to have the show taken to his Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy, in 1962, where it was the hit of the festival. The show toured Europe that year and at Christmas returned to New York's Lincoln Center.

GOSPEL MUSIC

WHAT IS GOSPEL MUSIC?

When Africans were brought to America as slaves between the 1600s and the 1800s, they were generally forbidden from celebrating their African religions. As slaves became familiar with European Christian hymns sung by whites, they created music that combined African rhythms and religious practices with European religious traditions. From this blend of traditions, spiritual music was born in the countryside of America.

In the 1920s, as African Americans moved from the country to seek jobs and homes in the city, gospel music was born. The makers of gospel music borrowed melodies and rhythms from popular songs of the day and gave them religious messages. Many of the important creators of this music began by playing blues and jazz. You will hear many of their names mentioned in ***Black Nativity***.

GOSPEL MUSIC- ELEMENTS TO LISTEN FOR

RHYTHM: This important aspect of African music remains in African American religious music. Listen for strong bass guitar, drums, hand clapping, and foot stomping.

CALL AND RESPONSE: The powerful leader sings a phrase or a word, and the chorus (often joined by the audience) echoes it.

REPETITION: A phrase or word is repeated several times. If sung softly and slowly, this repetition can be calming and soothing. If sung loudly and quickly, it can excite listeners.

IMPROVISATION: Although most of the song is written down and played the same way each time, much of gospel music depends on powerful lead singers who improvise, creating new music on the spot.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES: The LYRICS (words) of gospel songs often use the first person, (I, me, us, we) to describe personal experiences.

WARNINGS ABOUT BAD BEHAVIOR: Lyrics often warn sinners about the consequences of bad behavior.

PROMISE OF PERSONAL SALVATION: Lyrics often express the joys and rewards of a religious life. Many lyrics promise a brand new morning, a new day, the beauty of heaven.

HAVE YOU HEARD....

Gospel singers on popular radio stations? Artists like Boyz II Men and Whitney Houston sing gospel music, and their popular ballads have gospel influences. Recently, radio stations have featured gospel hits by Sounds of Blackness, Kirk Franklin, BeBe and CeCe Winans, and others.

ACTIVITIES

Play a tape or CD of "Why I Sing" by Kirk Franklin, or "I'm Going All the Way" or "I Believe" by Sounds of Blackness, or a recent song by BeBe and CeCe Winans.

What **PERSONAL EXPERIENCES** do you hear in the lyrics?

Clap out the **RHYTHM** of the drum. Hum what the bass is playing. What other instruments do you hear?

Raise your hand each time you hear a CALL from the lead singer and a **RESPONSE** from the chorus.

Raise your hand each time you hear **REPETITION.**

In the early 1920s New York City was a national center for business, arts, and education. Harlem, a city within that city, became the center of African American cultural life of the time. **The Harlem Renaissance** was the name given to a movement of writers, poets, painters, musicians, and educators who came together to protest the treatment of African Americans in the United States and to celebrate African- American culture. Important writers of this period include: poet James Weldon Johnson, social activist W.E.B. DuBois, singers Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson, and performers Duke Ellington and Josephine Baker.

THE GOSPEL TRADITION OF COLLABORATION:
PLAYWRIGHT, DIRECTOR, AUDIENCE

Many artists have come together to create *Black Nativity.*

The **PLAYWRIGHT**, Langston Hughes, was inspired by the power and excitement of gospel music.

The **DIRECTOR/CHOREOGRAPHER**, Mike Malone, was inspired by Langston Hughes and by his early dance teachers.

The **DESIGNERS, ACTORS, SINGERS, MUSICIANS, AND TECHNICIANS** are inspired by the director and by the power and message of the music.

But most importantly, all the artists want to inspire YOU!

THE PLAYWRIGHT: LANGSTON HUGHES (1902-1967)

Langston Hughes, born James Mercer Langston Hughes in Joplin, Missouri, is one of the most famous African-American writers. He spent a lonely childhood with his impoverished mother and grandmother. Hughes began writing poetry in high school. He dropped out of college after one year, and worked at odd jobs in the United States, Mexico, and Europe. In 1925, while working as a busboy in Washington, D.C., he placed three of his poems on poet Vachel Lindsay's table. That night Lindsay announced that he had discovered a "Negro busboy poet" and read Hughes' poems aloud to a gathering. The next day, Hughes had nationwide publicity.

Hughes attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania from 1926-1929. By this time he was known among prominent African American writers, musicians, and artists during the period known as the Harlem Renaissance. He continued to write and publish novels, plays, poems, and two autobiographies. He founded theater groups in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. He taught at several universities, received three honorary doctorates, and lectured throughout Europe. Langston Hughes died in 1967. His most famous works include *The Negro Speaks of Rivers, Simple Speaks His Mind,* and *Montage on a Dream Deferred.*

THE DIRECTOR: MIKE MALONE

In the strong gospel tradition of COLLABORATION (working together) and IMPROVISATION (creating something on the spot), Mr. Malone adds personal touches to the direction and choreography of Hughes's play.

Mr. Malone is coordinator of the musical theater program at Howard University and

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co-founder of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Washington, D.C. He is an award-winning choreographer, and received a 1993 Keefer Award for Theatrical Brilliance as best director for ***Black Nativity***. He did his first production of the play in 1979 at Karamu House, a major center for African American theater in Cleveland. Six Langston Hughes plays were produced there in 1936-37.

Of ***Black Nativity*** Mr. Malone says:

"I am interested in this piece because it is a different way of looking at the Christmas story. We can look into another telling of the story to see what is the same and what is different in the ways that people celebrate. It is something new to look forward to at holiday time, in addition to *A Christmas Carol* and *The Nutcracker Suite*."

THE AUDIENCE: YOU

This production has singing, movement, hand-clapping, and celebration. There will be times when the music is powerful and exciting. In the gospel tradition, YOU are invited to clap, sing, and respond to the performers.

There will also be quiet times, when the narration and the music softens, inviting you to be still and to listen carefully to the dialogue and the lyrics.

All the artists who created this production hope that you will collaborate with them and ENJOY YOURSELVES during this special kind of Christmas celebration featuring an important part of American musical history.

BEFORE AND AFTER THE PERFORMANCE QUESTIONS

Before the performance, prepare yourself by reading about what to look for in the first column.
After the performance, answer the questions in the second column.

BEFORE:
Look for the ways in which the dancers move through space.

AFTER:
Did dancers make circles, lines, or other patterns as they moved across the floor?
Describe how quickly or slowly the dancers moved. (Did they leap into the air? Did they ever sit or lie on the floor?)

BEFORE:
Look for solo dancers.

AFTER:
How many solo dancers do you recall?
How did solo dancers interact with large groups of dancers?

BEFORE:
Look for ways the dancers use rhythm.

AFTER:
Which dancers used the rhythm most dramatically?
Describe their movements.

BEFORE:
Look for the different shapes the dancers make with their bodies.

AFTER:
What kind of shapes did the dancers make with their bodies?
How did they use their arms and legs to make those shapes?

BEFORE:
Costumes will help to tell the play's story.
Look for the various colors, fabrics, and shapes used in the costumes.

AFTER:
What colors, fabrics, and shapes were used in the costumes?
Which colors were used most often, and why?
How did the fabric affect the dancers' movement?
How did the colors and the shapes of the actors' and dancers' costumes tell you about their characters?

BEFORE:
Look for the ways in which lights are used to create specific moods.

AFTER:
What scenes created a strong mood or emotion?
Describe the lighting in those scenes.
What colors were used to light memorable scenes?
When were spotlights used?

BEFORE:
"Props" are objects used in plays. Watch for props and characters who use them.

AFTER:
Name three props used in the play.
Who used them?
Why were they important?

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